

THE CLUE OF THE PIGTAIL

By SAX ROHMER

"THE most promising lad at the yard," said Inspector Weymouth; and his usually gruff voice had softened strangely.

Nayland Smith struck his right fist into the palm of his left hand and swore under his breath, striding up and down the neat little room. No one spoke for a moment, and in the silence I could hear the whispering of the Thames outside—of the Thames which had so many strange secrets to tell and now was burdened with another.

He lay prone upon the deal table—this latest of the river's dead—dressed in rough sailor garb, and to all outward seeming a seaman of nondescript nationality—such as is no stranger in Wapping and Shadwell. His dark, curly hair hung clammily about the brown forehead; his skin was stained, they told me. He wore a gold ring in one ear, and three fingers of the left hand were missing.

"It was almost the same with Mason." The river police inspector was speaking. "Three weeks ago, on a Wednesday, he went off in his own time on some funny business down St. George's way—and Thursday night the 10 o'clock boat got the grapple on him off Hanover Hole. His first two fingers on the right hand were clean gone and his left hand was mutilated frightfully."

He paused and glanced at Smith. "That Lascar, too," he continued, "that you came down to see, sir—you remember his hands?"

Smith nodded. "He was not a Lascar," he said, shortly. "He was a dacoit."

Silence fell again. I turned to the array of objects lying on the table—those which had been found in the dead man's clothing. None of them were noteworthy, except that which had been found thrust into the loose neck of his shirt. This last it was which had led the police to send for Nayland Smith; for it constituted the first clue which had come to light pointing to the authors of these mysterious tragedies.

It was a Chinese pigtail. That alone was sufficiently remarkable; but it was rendered more so by the fact that the plaited queue was a false one, being attached to a most ingenious bald wig.

"You're sure it wasn't part of a Chinese make-up?" questioned Weymouth, his eye on the strange relic. "Poor Cadby was clever at disguise."

Smith snatched the wig from my hands with a certain irritation and tried to fit it on the dead detective.

"Too small by inches!" he jerked; "and look how it's padded in the crown. This thing was made for a most abnormal head."

He threw it down and fell to pacing the room again. "Where did you find him—exactly?" he asked.

"Limehouse Reach—under Commercial Dock Pier—exactly an hour ago."

"And you last saw him at 8 o'clock last night?"—to Weymouth.

"Eight to a quarter past."

"You think he had been dead nearly twenty-four hours, Petrie?"

"Roughly—twenty-four hours," I replied.

"Then we know that Cadby was on the track of the Fu-Manchu group, that he followed up some clue which led him to the neighborhood of old Ratcliffe Highway and that he died the same night. You are sure that is where he was going?"

"Yes," said Weymouth. "He was jealous of giving anything away, poor chap; it meant a big lift for him if he pulled the case off; but he gave me to understand that he expected to spend last night in that district. He left the yard about eight, as I've said, to go to his rooms and dress for the job."

"Did he keep any record of his cases?"

"Of course! He was most particular. Cadby was a man with ambitions, sir! You'll want to see his book. Wait while I get his address. It's somewhere in Brixton."

He went to the telephone, and Inspector Ryman covered up the dead man's face.

Nayland Smith was palpably excited.

"He almost succeeded where we have failed, Petrie!" he said. "There is no doubt in my mind that he was hot on the track of Fu-Manchu! Poor Mason had probably blundered on the scent, too, and met with a similar fate. Without other evidence the fact that they both died in the same way as the dacoit would be conclusive, for we know that Fu-Manchu killed the dacoit!"

"What is the meaning of the mutilated hands, Smith?"

"God knows! Colby's death was from drowning, you say?"

"There are no other marks of violence."

"But he was a very strong swimmer, doctor!" interrupted Inspector Ryman. "Why, he pulled off the quarter-mile championship at the Crystal Palace last year! Cadby wasn't a man easy to drown. And as for Mason, he was an R. N. R. and like a fish in the water!"

Smith shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"Let us hope that one day we shall know how they died," he said, simply.

Weymouth returned from the telephone.

"The address is No. — Cold Harbor lane," he reported. "I shall not be able to come along, but you can't miss it—it's down beside the Brixton police station. There's no family, fortunately; he was quite alone in the world. His case book isn't in the American desk, which you'll find in his sitting room; it's in the cupboard in the corner—top shelf. Here are his keys, all intact. I think this is the cupboard key."

Smith nodded.

"Come on, Petrie!" he said. "We haven't a second to waste!"

Our cab was waiting, and in a few seconds we were speeding along Wapping High street. We had gone no more than a few hundred yards, I think, when Smith suddenly slapped his open hand down on his knee.

"That pigtail!" he cried. "I have left it behind! We must have it, Petrie! Stop! Stop!"

The cab was pulled up and Smith alighted.

"Don't wait for me!" he directed, hurriedly. "Here—take Weymouth's card. Remember where he said the book was? It's all we want. Come straight on to Scotland Yard and meet me there."

"But, Smith," I protested, "a few minutes can make no difference!"

"Can't it!" he snapped. "Do you suppose Fu-Manchu is going to leave evidence like that lying about? It's a thousand to one he has it already, but there is just a bare chance!"

Of my drive that night I remember nothing, for so lost in thought was I that the cab was outside the house for which I was bound ere I realized that we had quitted the purlieu of Wapping. Yet I had had leisure to review the whole troop of events which had crowded my life since the return of Nayland Smith from Burma. Mentally I had looked again upon the dead Sir Crichton Davey, and with Smith had waited in the dark for the dreadful thing that had killed him. Now, with those remorseless memories jostling in my mind, I was entering the house of Fu-Manchu's last victim; and the shadow of that giant evil seemed to lie upon it like a palpable cloud.

Cadby's old landlady greeted me with a queer mixture of fear and embarrassment in her manner.

"I am Dr. Petrie," I said, "and I regret that I bring bad news respecting Mr. Cadby."

"Oh, sir!" she cried, "don't tell me that anything has happened to him! And divining something of the mission on which I was come, for such sad duty often falls to the lot of the medical man: 'Oh! the poor brave lad!' And again: 'Oh! the poor brave lad!'"

Indeed, I respected the dead man's memory more than ever from that hour, since the sorrow of the worthy old soul was

quite pathetic, and spoke eloquently for the unhappy cause of it.

"There was a terrible wailing at the back of the house last night, doctor, and I heard it again to-night a second before you knocked. Poor lad! It was the same when his mother died!"

At the moment I paid little attention to her words, for such beliefs are common, unfortunately, but when she was sufficiently composed I went on to explain what I thought necessary. And now the old lady's embarrassment took precedence of her sorrow, and presently the truth came out.

"There's a—young lady—in his rooms, sir!"

I started. This might mean little or might mean much.

"She came and waited for him last night, doctor—from 10 until 10:30—and this morning again. She came the third time about an hour ago, and has been upstairs since!"

"Do you know her, Mrs. Dolan?"

"Well, doctor," she said, wiping her eyes the while, "I do! And God knows he was a good lad and I like a mother to him—but she is not the girl I should have liked a son of mine to take up with!"

At any other time this would have been amusing; now it might be serious. Mrs. Dolan's account of the wailing became suddenly significant—for perhaps it meant that one of Fu-Manchu's dacoit followers was watching the house, to give warning of any stranger's approach! It was unlikely that I should forget the dark eyes of another of Fu-Manchu's servants. Was that beautiful lure of men, even now in the house, completing her evil work?

"I should never have allowed her in his rooms," began Mrs. Dolan again. Then there was an interruption.

A soft rustling reached my ears—intimately feminine. The girl was stealing down!

I leaped out into the hall, and she turned and fled blindly before me—back up the stairs! Taking three steps at a time, I followed her, bounded into the room above almost at her heels and stood with my back to the door.

She covered against the desk by the window, a slim figure in a clinging silk gown, which alone explained Mrs. Dolan's distrust. The gaslight was turned very low and her hat shadowed her face, but could not hide its startling beauty, could not mar the brilliancy of the skin nor dim the wonderful eyes of this modern Delilah. For it was she!

"So I came in time!" I said grimly, and turned the key in the lock.

"Oh!" she panted at that, and stood facing me, leaning back with her jewel-laden hands clutching the desk edge.

"Give me whatever you have removed from here," I said sternly, "and then prepare to accompany me."

She took a step forward, her eyes wide with fear, her lips parted.

"I have taken nothing!" she said. Her breast was heaving tumultuously. "Oh! let me go! please let me go!" and impulsively she threw herself forward, pressing clasped hands against my shoulder and looking up into my face with passionate pleading.

It is with some shame that I confess how her charm enveloped me like a magic cloud. Unfamiliar with the complex Oriental temperament, I had laughed at Nayland Smith when he had spoken of this girl's infatuation. "Love in the East," he had said, "is like the conjuror's mango tree; it is born, grows and flowers at the touch of a hand." Now in her face I read confirmation of his words. Her clothes or her hair exhaled a faint perfume. Like all Fu-Manchu's servants she was perfectly chosen for her peculiar duties. Her beauty was wholly intoxicating.

But I thrust her away.

"You have no claim to mercy!" I said. "Do not count upon any. What have you taken from here?"

She grasped the lapels of my coat. I felt how she trembled. "I will tell you all I can—all I dare!" she panted, eagerly.

"I should know how to deal with your friend, but with you—I am lost! If you could only understand—you would not be so cruel!" Her slight accent added charm to the musical voice. "I am not free, as your English women are. What I do I must do, for it is the will of my master—and I am only a slave! Ah! you are not a man if you can give me to the police! You have no heart if you can forget that I tried to save you once!"

I had feared that plea, for, in her own Oriental fashion, she certainly had tried to save me from a deadly peril once—at the expense of my friend. But I had feared the plea—for I did not know how to meet it. How could I give her up, perhaps to stand her trial for murder? And now I felt silent, and she saw why I was silent.

"I may deserve no mercy—I may be even as bad as you think, but what have you to do with the police? It is not your work to hound a woman to death! Could you ever look another woman in the eyes—one that you loved, and know that she trusted you—if you had done such a thing? Ah! I have no friend in all the world, or I should not be here! Do not be my enemy, my judge, and make me worse than I am; be my friend and save me—from him!" The beautiful face was close to mine; her breath fanned my cheek. "Have mercy on me!"

At that moment I honestly would have given half of my worldly possessions to have been spared the decision which I knew I must come to. After all, what proof had I that she was a willing accomplice of Dr. Fu-Manchu? Furthermore, she was an Oriental, and her code must necessarily be different from mine. Irreconcilable as the thing may be with Western ideas, Nayland Smith had really told me that he believed the girl to be a slave. Then there remained that other reason why I loathed the idea of becoming her captor. It was almost tantamount to betrayal! Must I soil my hands with such work now?

Thus—I suppose—her seductive beauty arguing against my sense of right. The jewelled fingers grasped my shoulders nervously, and her slim body quivered against mine as she watched me with all her soul in her eyes—in an abandonment of pleading despair. Then I remembered the fate of the man in whose room we stood.

"You lured Cadby to his death!" I said—and shook her off.

"No! no!" she cried wildly, clutching at me. "No! I swear by the holy name I did not! I did not! I watched him—spied upon him—yes! But listen—it was because he would not be warned that he met his death! I could not save him! Ah! I am not so bad as that! I will tell you—I have taken his notebook and torn out the last pages and burned them! Look! in the grate! The book was too big to steal away. I came twice and could not find it! There! will you let me go?"

"If you will tell me where and how to seize Dr. Fu-Manchu—yes!"

Her hands dropped and she took a backward step. A new terror was upon her.

"I dare not! I dare not!"

"Then you would—if you dared?"

She was watching me intently.

"Not if you would go to find him!" she said.

And with all that I thought her to be, and stern servant of justice that I would have had myself, I felt the hot blood leap to my cheek at all which the words implied. She grasped my arm.

"Could you hide me from him if I came to you—and told you all I know?"

"The authorities!"

"Ah!" Her eyes flashed. "They can put me on the rack if they choose, but never one word would I speak! Never one little word!"

She threw up her hand scornfully. Then the proud glance softened again.

"But I will speak for you!"

Closer she came, and closer, until she could whisper in my ear.

"Hide me from your police—from him—from everybody, and I will no longer be his slave!"

My heart was beating with painful rapidity; I had not counted on this warring with a woman; moreover, it was harder than I could have dreamed of. For some time I had been aware that by the charm of her personality and the art of her pleading she had brought me down from my judgment seat—had made it all but impossible for me to give her up to justice. Now I was disarmed—but in a quandary. What should I do? What could I do? I turned away from her and walked to the hearth, in which some paper ash lay and yet emitted a faint smell.

Not more than ten seconds elapsed, I am confident, from the time that I stepped across the room until I glanced back. But she had gone!

As I leaped to the door the key turned gently from the outside.

"Ma' alesh!" came her soft whisper; "but I am afraid to trust you—yet! Be comforted, for there is one near who would have killed you had I wished it! Remember—I will come to you whenever you will take me and hide me!"

Light footsteps pattered down the stairs. I heard a stifled cry from Mrs. Dolan as the mysterious visitor ran past her. The front door opened and closed.

"Shen-Yan's is a dope shop in one of the burrows off the old Ratcliffe Highway," said Inspector Weymouth. "Singapore Charlie's they call it. It's a centre for some of the Chinese societies, I believe, but all sorts of opium smokers use it. There have never been any complaints that I know of. I don't understand this."

We stood in his room at New Scotland Yard, bending over a sheet of foolscap upon which were arranged some burned fragments from poor Cadby's grate; for so hurriedly had the girl done her work that combustion had not been complete.

"What do we make of this?" said Smith.

Hunchback . . . lascar went up . . . unlike . . . others . . . not return . . . till Shen-Yan (there is no doubt about the name, I think) 'turned me . . . booming sound . . . lascar in . . . mortuary I could identify . . . not for . . . days . . . or suspicious . . . Tuesday night in a different make . . . or snatch . . . pigtail."

"The pigtail again!" rapped Weymouth.

"She evidently burned the torn-out pages all together," continued Smith. "They lay flat, and this was in the middle! I see the hand of retributive justice in that, inspector! Now—we have a reference to a hunchback, and what follows amounts to this: A lascar (among several other persons) went up somewhere, presumably upstairs—at Shen-Yan's—and did not come down again. Cadby, who was there disguised, noted a booming sound. Later he identified the lascar in some mortuary. We have no means of fixing the date of this visit to Shen-Yan's, but I feel inclined to put down the 'lascar' as the dacoit who was murdered by Fu-Manchu! It is sheer supposition however. But that Cadby meant to pay another visit to the place in a different make-up or disguise is evident, and that the Tuesday night proposed was last night is a reasonable deduction. The reference to a pigtail is principally interesting because of what was found on Cadby's body."

Inspector Weymouth nodded affirmatively, and Smith glanced at his watch.

"Exactly 10:23," he said. "I will trouble you, inspector, for the freedom of your fancy wardrobe. There is time to spend an hour in the company of Shen-Yan's opium fiends!"

Weymouth raised his eyebrows.

"It might be risky. What about an official visit?"

Nayland Smith laughed.

"Worse than useless! By your own showing the place is open to inspection. No—guile against guile! We are dealing with a Chinaman, with the incarnate essence of Eastern subtlety, with the most stupendous genius that the modern Orient has produced!"

"I don't believe in disguises!" said Weymouth, with a certain truculence. "It's mostly played out, that game, and generally leads to failure. Still, if you're determined, sir, there's an end of it! Foster will make your face up. What disguise do you propose to adopt?"

"A sort of Dago seaman, I think; something like poor Cadby. I can rely on my knowledge of the brutes if I am sure of my disguise."

"You are forgetting me, Smith!" I said.

He turned to me quickly.

"Petrie," he replied, "it is my business, unfortunately, but it is no sort of hobby!"

"You mean that you can no longer rely upon me?" I said, angrily.

Smith grasped my hand and met my rather frigid stare with a look of real concern in his gaunt, bronzed face.

"My dear old chap!" he answered, "that was really unkind! You know that I meant something totally different!"

"It's all right, Smith!" I said, immediately, ashamed of my choler, and wrung his hand heartily. "I can pretend to smoke opium as well as another. I shall be going, too, inspector."

As a result of this little passage of words, some twenty minutes later two dangerous looking seafaring ruffians entered a waiting cab, accompanied by Inspector Weymouth, and were driven off into the wilderness of London's night. In this theatrical business there was, to my mind, something ridiculous—almost childish; and I could have laughed heartily had it not been that grim tragedy lurked so near to hand.

The mere recollection that somewhere at our journey's end Fu-Manchu awaited us was sufficient to sober my reflections. Fu-Manchu, who, with all the powers represented by Nayland Smith pitted against him, pursued his dark schemes triumphantly and lurked in hiding within this very area which was so sedulously patrolled! Fu-Manchu, whom I had never seen, but whose name stood for horrors indefinable! Perhaps it was destined to meet the terrible Chinese doctor to-night!

I ceased to pursue a train of thought which promised to lead to morbid depths, and directed my attention to what Smith was saying.

"We will drop down from Wapping and reconnoitre, as you say the place is close to the river side. Then you can put us ashore somewhere below. Ryman can keep the launch close to the back of the premises and your fellows will be hanging about near the front—near enough to hear the whistle."

"Yes," assented Weymouth, "I've arranged for that. If you are suspected you shall give the alarm?"

"I don't know," said Smith, thoughtfully. "Even in that event I might wait a while."

"Don't wait too long!" advised the inspector. "We shouldn't be much wiser if your next appearance was on the end of a grapple, somewhere down Greenwich Reach—with half your fingers missing!"

The cab pulled up outside the river police depot, and Smith and I entered without delay, four shabby-looking fellows who had been seated in the office springing up to salute the inspector, who followed us in. He nodded.

"Guthrie and Lisle," he said, briskly, "get along and find a dark corner which commands the door of Singapore Charlie's, off the old highway. You look the dirtiest of the troupe. Guthrie, you might drop asleep on the pavement, and Lisle can argue with you about getting home. Don't move till you hear the whistle inside or have my orders, and note everybody that goes in and comes out. You other two belong to this division."

The C. I. D. men having departed, the remaining pair saluted again.

"Well, you're on special duty to-night. You've been prompt but don't stick your chests out so much. Do you know of a back way to Shen-Yan's?"

The men looked at one another and both shook their heads.

"There's an empty shop nearly opposite sir," replied one of them. "I know a broken window at the back where we could

climb in. Then we could get through to the front and watch from there."

"Good!" cried the inspector. "See you are not spotted, though, and if you hear the whistle, don't mind doing a bit of damage, but be inside Shen-Yan's like lightning! Otherwise, wait for orders."

Inspector Ryman came in, glancing at the clock.

"Launch is waiting," he said.

"Right!" replied Smith, thoughtfully. "I am half afraid, though, that the recent alarms may have scared our quarry—your man, Mason, and then Cadby. Against which, we have this, that so far as he is likely to know there has been no clue pointing to this opium den. Remember, he thinks Cadby's notes are destroyed."

"The whole business is an utter mystery to me!" confessed Ryman. "I'm told that there's some dangerous Chinese devil hiding somewhere in London, and that you expect to find him at Shen-Yan's. Supposing he uses that place, which is possible, how do you know he's there to-night?"

"I don't!" said Smith, "but it is the first clue we have had pointing to one of his haunts, and time means precious lives where Dr. Fu-Manchu is concerned!"

"Who is he, sir, exactly, this Dr. Fu-Manchu?"

"I have only the vaguest idea, inspector, but he is no ordinary criminal. He is the greatest genius which the powers of evil have put on earth for centuries! He has the backing of a political group whose wealth is enormous—and his mission in Europe is to pave the way! Do you follow me? He is the advance agent of a movement so epoch-making that not one Britisher and not one American in fifty thousand has ever dreamed of it!"

Ryman stared, but made no reply, and we went out, passing down to the breakwater and boarding the waiting launch. With her crew of three, the party numbered seven that swung cut into the Pool, and clearing the pier, drew in again and hugged the murky shore.

The night had been clear enough hitherto, but now came scudding rain banks to curtain the crescent moon, and anon, to unveil her again and show the muddy swirls about us. The view was not extensive from the launch. Sometimes a deepening of the near shadows would tell of a moored barge, or lights high above our heads mark the deck of a large vessel. In the floods of moonlight gaunt shapes towered above; in the ensuing darkness only the oily glitter of the tide occupied the foreground of the night piece.

The Surrey shore was a broken wall of blackness patched with lights about which moved hazy suggestions of human activity. The bank we were following offered a prospect even more gloomy; a dense, dark mass, amid which, sometimes, mysterious half-tones told of a dock gate, or sudden high lights leaped flaring to the eye.

Then, out of the mystery ahead, a green light grew and crept down upon us. A giant shape loomed up and frowned crushingly upon the little craft. A blaze of light, the jangle of a bell, and it was past. We were dancing in the wash of one of the Scotch steamers, and the murk had fallen again.

Discords of remote activity rose above the more intimate throbbing of our screw, and we seemed a pigmy company floating past the workshops of Brobdingnagian toilers. The chill of the near water communicated itself to me, and I felt the protection of my shabby garments inadequate against it.

Far over on the Surrey shore a blue light—vaporous, mysterious—flicked translucent tongues against the night's curtain. It was a weird, elusive flame, leaping, wavering, changing from blue to a yellow violet—rising—falling.

"Only a gas works!" came Smith's voice, and I knew that he, too, had been watching those elfin fires; "but it always reminds me of a Mexican teocalli, and the altar of sacrifice!"

"The smile was apt, but gruesome. I thought of Dr. Fu-Manchu and the severed fingers, and could not repress a shudder."

"On your left, past the wooden pier! Not where the lamp is—beyond that; next to the dark, square building—Shen-Yan's!"

It was Inspector Ryman speaking.

"Drop us somewhere handy, then," replied Smith, "and lie close in with your ears wide open. We may have to run for it, so don't go far away!"

From the tone of his voice I knew that the night mystery of the Thames had claimed at least one other victim.

"Dead slow!" came Ryman's order. "We'll put into the stone stairs."

A seemingly drunken voice was droning from a neighborhood alley way as Smith lurched in hulking fashion to the door of a little shop above which, crudely painted, were the words:

SHEN-YAN BARBER.

I shuffled along behind him, and had time to note the box of studs, German shaving tackle, and rolls of twist which lay untidily in the window ere Smith kicked the door open, clattered down three wooden steps, and pulled himself up with a jerk, seizing my arm for support.

We stood in a bare and very dirty room, which could only claim kinship with a civilized shaving saloon by virtue of the grimy towel thrown across the back of the solitary chair. A Yiddish theatrical bill of some kind, illustrated, adorned one of the walls, and another bill, in what may have been Chinese, completed the decorations. From behind a curtain heavily brocaded with filth a little Chinaman appeared, dressed in a loose smock, black trousers and thick-soled slippers, and advancing, shook his head vigorously.

"No shavee—no shavee!" he chattered, simiol fashion, squinting from one to the other of us with his twinkling eyes. "Too late! Shuttee shop!"

"Don't you come none of it wi' me!" roared Smith, in a voice of amazing gruffness, and shook an artificially dirtied fist under the Chinaman's nose. "Get inside and gimme an' my mate a couple o' pipes! Smokee pipe, you yellow scum-savvy?"

My friend bent forward and glared into the other's eyes with a vindictiveness that amazed me, unfamiliar as I was with this form of gentle persuasion.

"Kop 'old o' that!" he said, and thrust a coin into the Chinaman's yellow paw. "Keep me waitin' an' I'll pull the dam' shop down, Charlie. You can lay to it!"

"No hab got pipee—" began the other.

Smith raised his fist and Yan capitulated

